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ABSTRACT

An examination was made of the role-taking process with respect to aggressive behavior and sex roles. Ss were 20 boys and 20 girls from a housing project. All were caucasians of low socioeconomic status. Each S was shown 19 cards, each containing a schematic cartoon and involving two major figures in a particular situation. For each card there was an aggressive content attributed to the Object Figure. Each child was tested individually. An S's score was the number of statements scored as anti-social aggression. Results were analyzed by means of a 2 x 2 x 2 analysis of variance, with the following variables: sex of Object Figure, sex of Identification Figure, and sex of subject. Results support the proposition that children have good knowledge early of the behaviors associated with roles other than their own. The effectiveness of the role-taking task used indicates a valuable technique for examining differences attributable to sex. (CK)

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Sex Role-Taking and Aggressive Behavior in Children*

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Introduction

Sarbin (1968), in discussing role expectations and role enactment, states, "In role enactment an individual is expected to 'behave in particular ways' in the sense that the behavior is predictable; more important however. . .in the sense that others believe he ought to do so" (p. 501). It is quite early in development that the "ought" aspect of role determined behavior is apparent, and particularly in respect to sex-related behaviors (Kagan, 1964). However, what is valuable about a role approach is the proposition that development includes not only a knowledge about what is appropriate for one's own behavior, but also what is appropriate for individuals occupying other social positions and categories with which one interacts. A method of explicating such knowledge is that of role-taking. "Role-taking in its most general form is a process of looking at or anticipating another's behavior by viewing it in the context of a role imputed to that other (Turner, 1966, p. 152)." A role-taking task can then demonstrate knowledge of role expectations in young children and the effects of role prescriptions on responses in particular social situations.

The present study looks at the role-taking process with respect to aggressive behavior and sex roles. There are many studies that have been concerned with comparing differences in aggression between

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the two sexes. Oetzel (1966), in summarizing the literature on sex differences in aggression, indicated that in 44 of 53 studies examined males were found to have higher aggression scores. There have been numerous theories that have attempted to explain this relationship between sex role development and aggressive behavior (see Bronfenbrenner, 1960). In general, the emphasis is on how a child comes to function within the expectations for aggressive behavior held for his sex, or the process of learning whereby certain aggressive behaviors are reinforced for members of one sex but not for another. Our interest in the present study is the degree to which children are sensitive to prescriptions for aggressive behaviors for members of the opposite sex, as indicated by the way in which these prescriptions determine their responses in a social situation. It is hypothesized that children quite early have such a sensitivity to cross-sex expectations, and therefore that both boys and girls will display more aggressive responses when taking the role of a boy; and further, that more aggressive behavior will be shown when the role partner is a boy. Finally, it is expected that the strong influence of role-taking should minimize the effect of sex differences between subjects.

Method

Subjects

Subjects were twenty boys and twenty girls from a housing project in Boston. All subjects were white and were nine or ten years old. Most came from families on welfare and could thus be designated as of low socioeconomic class. These children were used because of the numerous findings indicating that lower-class children conform more

closely to traditional sex role standards than do middle-class children. Children over the age of eight were used because of the expectation that such children would have relatively developed role-taking skills (Flavell, 1968).

Materials and procedure

Each subject was shown nineteen cards, each containing a schematic cartoon. Each card involved two major figures in a particular situation. One figure is shown speaking; this figure is termed the "Object Figure." There is a second figure for whom the subject must make a response, termed the "Identification Figure."

The nineteen cards included four initial warm-up cards and fifteen test cards. Scoring was based only on the fifteen test cards. For each card there was a specific statement, aggressive in content, attributed to the Object Figure. A pilot study provided the means for assessing the effectiveness of the content of most of these statements. Examples of statements are: "I ought to sock you for that," "You're a chicken," "What a dummy you are." The subject was required to respond as the Identification Figure would respond to the statement provided. For half of the subjects the Object Figure was male, for half female. For half of each of these groups the Identification Figure was male, and for half female. Thus, there were eight groups divided on the basis of sex of subject, sex of Object Figure, and sex of Identification Figure.

Each child was tested individually. Instructions, provided by a pre-recorded tape, were as follows:

> We're going to show you some pictures of two kids. Something is happening between them. I'll tell you what one of them is saying and you tell us what the other one is saying.

A taped male voice was used for those groups for which the Object Figure was a boy, and a taped female voice was used for groups for which the Object Figure was a girl. The four warm-up cards, which had been found in a pilot study to elicit relatively neutral responses, were given first, one at a time. The aggressive statement for each card was given, and the tape was stopped between cards to allow the subject time to respond. If the subject's response was unclear or perfunctory he was asked, "Does he say anything else?" This procedure was used for all the cards.

At the end of the testing each subject was allowed to take a candy bar from a large bag of candy.

To make for a finer distinction between responses, two categories similar to those used by Sears, Rau, and Alpert (1965) were used. That is, each response was scored as either an antisocial aggression response or as a neutral-prosocial aggression response. These categories were defined as follows:

Antisocial aggression - Any action or verbal response indicating overt destructive behavior or wishes toward the other in the sense of physical harm or any statement that was provocative in the sense of making a challenge to the other or indicating refusal to compromise or resolve differences.

Neutral - Prosocial aggression - Highly subtle and subdued expression of aggression with obvious intent not to escalate aggression; responses that indicated no aggression or were wholly unclear as to the presence of aggression.

A subject's score was the number of statements scored as anti-social aggression. Thus, a subject's score could range from zero to

fifteen. The reliability of scoring was examined by having a second judge score the protocol of a subject, selected randomly, in each condition. Interrater agreement of 87% was found.

Results

Results were analyzed by means of a 2 x 2 x 2 analysis of variance, with the following variables: sex of Object Figure, sex of Identification Figure, and sex of subject.

(1) Sex of Identification Figure was found to be significant ($F = 13.41$, $df = 1$, $p < .01$). This finding supported the hypothesis that subjects would give significantly more antisocial aggression responses for boy Identification Figures than for girl Identification Figures (see Table 1 for specific means).

(2) Sex of Object Figure reached only the .06 level of confidence. Though not significant the means were in the direction predicted. That is, subjects produced more antisocial aggression responses directed toward boy figures than toward girl figures.

(3) A significant interaction was found for Identification Figure X Object Figure ($F = 4.52$, $df = 1$, $p < 05$). Means were tested using the Duncan Multiple-Range Test (Duncan, 1966). The boy Object Figure - boy Identification Figure combination was found to elicit greater aggressive response than any other. None of the other means differed significantly from each other.

(4) No significant difference was found for sex of subject.

Insert Table 1

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Results thus supported the hypothesis that subjects would give more antisocial aggression responses for boy Identification Figures than for girl Identification Figures. The hypothesis that subjects would give more antisocial aggression responses in conditions showing boy Object Figures was confirmed, but only at the .06 confidence level. The boy Object Figure - boy Identification Figure condition was found to elicit significantly more aggression than any other condition.

Discussion

The results of this study support the proposition that children have good knowledge early of the behaviors associated with roles other than their own, and that such knowledge can determine the responses they give in social situations. Subjects of both sexes appeared to share common expectations in regard to sex-appropriate behavior.

Particularly important was the absence of significant differences between male and female subjects for responses categorized as antisocial aggression, along with the finding that all subjects manifested more of such aggressive responses when taking the role of a boy. These results indicate the limitations of viewing aggression purely in terms of the gender of a person without regard to the role being enacted. Adherence to the expectations associated with a particular role seem to be strong even in young children.

It has already been noted that a particular subject population was used in this study because of its strong adherence to traditional sex role standards. Findings with other groups might differ from those obtained in this study. Secondly, further study is necessary to examine whether similar results would be obtained with measures based on

overt actions rather than purely verbal responses. However, the effectiveness of the role taking task used indicates a valuable procedure for examining many of the differences attributable to sex.

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Table 1: Table of Means

Subjects	Boy Object-Boy Identification	Boy Object- Girl Identification	Girl Object - Boy Identification	Girl Object - Girl Identification
Boys	Condition I 10	Condition II 3.6	Condition III 7	Condition IV 6.2
Girls	Condition V 10	Condition VI 6.6	Condition VII 7.6	Condition VIII 5.8
Total	10	5.1	7.3	6.0